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Revitalization Conference fills hall

More than 340 people attended the Send North America Church Growth and Revitalization Conference Feb. 7 at Broadmoor Church, Madison. The event was designed to equip leaders with tools to infuse new life into churches in order to penetrate spiritual lostness in North America. Johnny Hunt, pastor of First Church, Woodstock, Ga., and former two-term president of the Southern Baptist Convention, was the facilitator. Steve Stone, associate executive director for church growth at the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) in Jackson, said, "We've come to realize that our Mississippi Baptist churches are in need of revitalization. We have developed action steps to identify revitalization needs in the state and are putting resources in place to meet those needs." The conference was sponsored by MBCB and the North American Mission Board in Alpharetta, Ga., and funded by a registration fee and gifts to the Cooperative Program. (Photo by Tony Martin)

U.S. pastor tortured in Iranian prison

TEHRAN, Iran (BP) — An Iranian-born pastor who is a U.S. citizen is undergoing physical and mental torture in a notoriously brutal Tehran prison while an international campaign for his release mounts, according to the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ).

Saeed Abedini was sentenced to eight years in prison for establishing a network of Christian house churches years ago and for "attempting to sway Iranian youth away from Islam." Since his conviction Jan. 27, Abedini has not been allowed to communicate with his wife and two children who live in the United States.

The pastor's Iranian relatives were allowed to visit him in prison Feb. 4, according to FoxNews.com, and he expressed apprehension and concern about his future. Abedini asked if there were international efforts to secure his freedom, the news network said, adding that his downtrodden spirit "is due to abuse and brainwashing techniques used by prison officials."



ABEDINI

"It is no surprise that the Iranian prison guards are engaging in this kind of psychological abuse," Jordan Sekulow, ACLJ's executive director, told FoxNews.com. "We know that Pastor Saeed is undergoing physical beatings and torture, and we know there is growing concern about his health. Now, a troubling report that the guards are trying to take away his hope by feeding him false information about his fate — trying to convince him that no one cares, that efforts to secure his freedom have ceased," Sekulow said.

ACLJ is leading international efforts to secure the pastor's release, including launching the website SaveSaeed.org and on Twitter promoting #SaveSaeed.

When Abedini's wife Naghmeh heard of her husband's crushed hopes, she told ACLJ, "When I heard this from my husband, I cried. It broke my heart. Behind those walls he feels helpless

see ABEDINI on p. 10

GuideStone promises fight over abortion/contraceptive mandate

DALLAS (BP) — GuideStone Financial Resources is currently working through the legislative route to address the concerns of pro-lifers regarding Obamacare's abortion/contraceptive mandate — but will consider legal action if legislators fail to address the mandate's impact on church health plans, GuideStone President O.S. Hawkins said.

The controversial mandate would force employer's health care plans to provide employees with contraceptives and abortion-causing drugs, free of charge. Most religious institutions and organizations are not exempt from the mandate. GuideStone, formerly known as the Annuity Board, is part of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Hawkins made the comments in light of a Feb. 1 announcement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that the federal agency said addressed the concerns of churches and religious organizations. The proposed rule change by HHS, Hawkins said, does ease the concerns of some churches who might not have been exempt from the mandate, but the proposed rule does not go far enough to protect religious organizations.

"We recognize, with regret, that these proposed regulations do not achieve the ultimate goal of removing objectionable forms of contraceptive coverage from the health care arena," Hawkins said. "We join with other believers and persons of conscience to pray and work toward that end."

"At the same time, we continue to press forward on the legislative and regulatory fronts to address this important issue in the context of church health plans. If those legislative and regulatory efforts do not bear timely and meaningful results, we will not hesitate to consider court action."

GuideStone fully and fervently supports the actions of other believers who are pursuing actions in the courts, and we share the heart-felt concern of our fellow-believers that these proposed rules do not protect the religious liberty of all employers who seek to uphold and reflect Biblical convictions."

As with other proposed regulations, there is a public comment period during which GuideStone and others may submit formal comments on the proposed rule. GuideStone will take advantage of this process to highlight the special considerations related to church plans, according to a GuideStone release.

Since the outset of the health care reform law in 2010, GuideStone, along with other denominational health plans, has formally commented on a number of proposed regulations regarding their impact on churches, ministers and church health plans.

"GuideStone has been pursuing multiple avenues of advocacy on behalf of our participants and the churches we serve, and we remain firmly committed to that advocacy," Hawkins said. "Although it does appear that certain restrictions that could have limited the ability of churches to be exempt from these rules may have been eased, various areas are reserved for future rule-making, so definitive statements at this time regarding whether or how these proposed rules could actually work are premature."

GuideStone is working with a coalition of other church

see GUIDESTONE on p. 10

Inside this issue

Directions 4

Sunday School lessons

Editorial....

Bibliocipher

How to Be a Christian

Revivals & Homecomings

Just for the

Classified

FEB 21 2013

137:7
MS



From the editor

WILLIAM PERKINS

Taking too much for granted

It's human nature to grow accustomed to conveniences that have been around since before most of us were born. Virtually all of us grew up with a telephone, but it was only a few generations ago that people marveled at the wires and handsets that projected their voices to faraway places at the speed of electricity. By contrast, young people today have difficulty grasping the concept of a time when smart phones weren't around and the word "Internet" didn't exist in the English language.

We tend to take for granted all the things in our daily lives that work so reliably that, well, we take them for granted. This is oftentimes the case with the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists' all-encompassing system for funding our vast ministries and helping us become one of the strongest Great Commission-centered organizations in the history of Christianity.

It has worked so reliably for so long that we tend to take it for granted.

The Cooperative Program is nothing short of a roaring success. For decades it has united fractious Baptists committed to pooling our resources to accomplish the words of our Lord and Savior in Matthew 28:18-20. It is a remarkable coming together of individual believers, autonomous churches, and equally-autonomous state and national conventions to serve one overarching purpose (and that's no easy task for any organization, Christian or otherwise).

Glory to God for what He has been able to do through the Cooperative Program. May Mississippi Baptists continue to be found faithful in helping to bring Mississippi and the world to Jesus through sacrificial support of the Cooperative Program — and may we never, never, take it for granted.

Miss. Baptists on disaster scene

HATTIESBURG, Miss. (Special) — A total of six Mississippi Baptist Disaster Relief Task Force teams had been activated by press deadline in response to the EF-4 tornado with 170 mile-per-hour winds that struck several areas of south Mississippi shortly before 6 p.m. on Feb. 10.

Jim Didlake, director of men's ministry at the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) and coordinator for the convention's Disaster Relief Task Force, said the teams are being used in hard-hit Forrest and Lamar counties for chainsaw/debris clearance and "blue tarp" work where sheets of heavy plastic are stretched over damaged roofs so homeowners can return to their homes. A listing of the teams' home bases was not available at press deadline.

Particularly hard-hit were the Oak Grove community in Lamar County and the Hattiesburg and Petal areas in Forrest County. Preliminary estimates put the number of structures damaged at over 200.

Didlake said Petal-Harvey Church in

Petal, Temple Church in Hattiesburg, and Main Street Church in Hattiesburg have opened their facilities to the disaster relief teams. Food needs are being met at the present time by a number of Mississippi Baptist churches in the area, he added.

The Enhanced Fujita (EF) Scale is a standardized method of rating tornado damage. The scale runs from EF-0 with winds of 65-85 miles per hour, to EF-5 with winds greater than 200 miles per hour.

The MBCB is accepting financial donations to assist the victims of the violent weather. Checks should be made payable to MBCB, with "Miss. Disaster Relief" noted on the memo line. The address to mail donations is Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, P.O. Box 530, Jackson, MS 39205-0530. On-line donations can be made at <http://mbcb.org/giving/>.

"In-kind" donations, such as food, clothing, or equipment, are not being accepted at this time.

How to start a great revival

Evan was involved in a small youth group at his home church until he went away to college. While at college his faith was tested, but eventually strengthened to the point that he felt compelled to return to his home church and share his passion for Christ with his youth group. He shared one night with 17 students who all were transformed as a result of hearing the simple, four-point message:

- You must confess any known sin to God, and put right any wrong done to man.
- You must put away any doubtful habit out of your life.
- You must obey the Spirit's promptings immediately.
- You must confess your faith in Christ publicly.

This simple meeting began a movement of God which we now know as the Welsh Revival of 1904-05. Evan Roberts was a young college student who saw God's Spirit work powerfully resulting in a nation-wide sweeping movement.

In five months, more than 100,000 people were saved. The country was changed so much that courts had no cases to try, police had no crimes to solve, the birth rate for unwed mothers dropped by almost half in two counties, and the churches were filled in every town.

All this began with one college student fully surrendered to the Lord.

Most people today associate college students with some very dangerous and destructive behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, sex, parties, and irresponsibility. Based on experience and encounters I've had with students on the college campus, some of these characterizations can be true. More than any other time in our history, the opportunities for sin and worldliness are available and acceptable in the culture in which we find ourselves.

Collegians are surrounded not only by sinfulness, but increasingly they are practically expected to adhere to godlessness, which is advocated on almost every university campus in our nation. If we are praying and believing God for spiritual awakening and revival, then more than anything based on our understanding of how God has worked in all of history, we should beg God for the hearts and lives of college students.

Almost every great movement of God has been sparked by the brokenness and desperation of college-aged individuals who



Guest opinion
with Jeff Jones

long for God's Spirit to bring revival. As a matter of fact, many revivals began on secular college campuses after Christian students came face-to-face with God in prayer. One campus would affect another campus, and then it would spread to churches and even to public arenas. The conviction of the Holy Spirit would wash over students, and they would become contagious as they boldly shared the Gospel as the basis of their transformed lives.

How can we pray for college students?

■ Pray that college students would understand the urgency to be submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ every day. Ask God to protect them from a consumer approach to Christianity and the church so that they would see everything else as insignificant in comparison to knowing Christ and being found in Him.

■ Pray that college students would understand the demand of holiness on their lives that comes from Jesus. Pray that they take seriously the relationship of purity they have with the Father and seek to "be holy because I am holy." Pray that repentance and forsaking of sin would be a habit that defines their walk with God.

■ Pray that college students would join together in prayer groups and seek God while calling out the names of students who are lost. Pray that the Spirit of God would open their eyes to the conditions around them, and burden them for their campuses.

■ Pray that college students would take responsibility and ownership of their faith, investing themselves in the lives of others who will come to Christ, share the Gospel and live holy lives as well. Paul's charge to Timothy was, "No one should despise your youth; instead, you should be an example to the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12).

■ Pray that God's Spirit and His Word

see JONES on p. 10

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'Packing heat' in church fires up debate

NASHVILLE (BP and local reports) — State legislatures increasingly are allowing concealed guns in church, either for personal protection or for worshippers designated as church security personnel.

On Feb. 4, Arkansas became the eighth state to pass legislation allowing concealed guns specifically in churches. In a lopsided bipartisan vote, state legislators voted to allow each church to decide whether individuals with concealed carry permits could take guns in church for personal protection.

"A person should be allowed to carry a firearm in a church that permits the carrying of a firearm for personal security," the Arkansas Church Protection Act reads, deeming such an option "immediately necessary for the preservation of the public peace, health, and safety" because "personal security is increasingly important."

Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and Wyoming also have laws allowing concealed guns specifically in churches, with varied stipulations including the possession of a proper permit, training, church approval, and congregational awareness, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Additionally, about 20 other states allow guns in churches because of "right to carry" laws, but have not specifically focused on churches in legislation.

In Mississippi

Mississippi has a basic concealed carry permit that specifically prohibits concealed carry in churches and a number of other places, and an "enhanced" permit which lifts many but not all of the restrictions of the basic permit after completing eight hours of classroom and shooting range instruction at the applicant's expense.

Holders of the enhanced permit, also known as the instructor-certified permit, can carry a concealed weapon in church.

A staff member in charge of security at a Mississippi Baptist church who wished to remain unidentified said his church's policy neither promotes nor discourages the carrying of concealed weapons. "The policy states that the church will adhere to all local, state, and federal laws concerning firearms. That's it," he said.

The Firearms Permit Unit of the Mississippi Department of Public Safety administers the concealed carry program in the state. For more information, visit <http://www.dps.state.ms.us/firearms>.

Creating safe place

In the past year, at least 75 people were violently killed on church

and faith-based property in the U.S., setting a new national record, according to Jimmy Meeks, a Southern Baptist preacher and Texas police officer who conducts seminars encouraging and training churches to properly arm themselves with guns.

Differing views on whether worshippers should carry guns at church can be found among Southern Baptists, ranging from Meeks to an Arizona pastor who shared on ChurchExecutive.com that he carries a concealed handgun in the pulpit, to a Louisiana pastor who recommends worshippers arm themselves with the "full armor of God" and perhaps employ off-duty police officers.

Meeks, whose next church safety seminar is scheduled May 6-7 at Wedgewood Church in Fort Worth, told Baptist Press churches need to realize the importance of creating a safe place to worship.

"If they don't believe it's necessary, they won't do anything. It won't matter if you pass laws allowing them to bring guns to churches if they don't think it's necessary, so you have to move beyond what I call the superstition that is much more prevalent in churches than spirituality," Meeks told Baptist Press.

"Many people believe there is something, divine protection, over a building that has a steeple on top of it, and that is superstition. Jesus said in Matthew 10:17, they will harm you in the house of worship, and we have all these people who have died for the faith, down through the years and who've died in churches, so the first thing you have to do is just realize this is a problem and we need to address this."

Wedgewood is the site of the Sept. 15, 1999, attack when a gunman entered the church during a youth activity, fired more than 100 rounds from two handguns, and exploded a homemade pipe bomb. He killed seven youth and wounded seven others before killing himself.

Since then, more than 425 people have been violently killed at houses of worship and faith-based property, Meeks said, adding that more than 125 of the victims were Baptists.

Larry Dickey, pastor of First Church in Sunizona, Ariz., wrote that he carries a gun in the pulpit because churches can't rely on law enforcement officials to keep congregants safe due to time and distance constraints.

"If someone were to come into our church with a gun or a knife, they could do a lot of damage before the police could get into the church. Even if we had officers in the parking lot, by the time they could get inside, it would be over," Dickey wrote on the website. "We, as citizens, need to protect what we love and be willing to lay our life on the line for them."

'Dangerous scenario'

The New Orleans metropolitan statistical area had the highest murder/non-negligent homicide rate in the country in 2010, at 20.8 incidents per 100,000 people, according to FBI statistics. There, First Church pastor David Crosby told Baptist Press that putting guns in the hands of worshippers would do more harm than good.

"Regular church attenders packing heat to protect themselves at church? I think that is a more dangerous scenario than

as president of the Southern Baptist Convention at the organization's annual meeting last summer. Luter was elected by acclamation as the convention's first African American president.

off-duty police officers, as his church sometimes has done.

"I would advise any congregation that felt the need for greater protection to follow this time-tested practice: utilize off-duty police officers. First Baptist New Orleans employed off-duty police officers for many years. They were armed and present on church property during worship services.

"I have spoken to retired and active law enforcement officers about this matter. These trained professionals are aware of the need for vigilance and are happy to help any congregation develop policies that contribute to the overall security on the church campus."

Training, practice

Those who promote armed worshippers stress the importance of training and practice. "In Texas, only about three percent of people authorized to carry guns carry them. Fewer than that are any good... with them," Meeks said.

"For these people who say now we've got guns in church, that's OK, but if you're not trained, if you don't practice, you're gonna hurt somebody. [The apostle] Paul said to Timothy to train yourself to be godly. Train yourself. 'Exercise thyself unto godliness,' the King James Version says.

"In other words, godliness is the product of practice. You don't just wake up godly. You work at it."

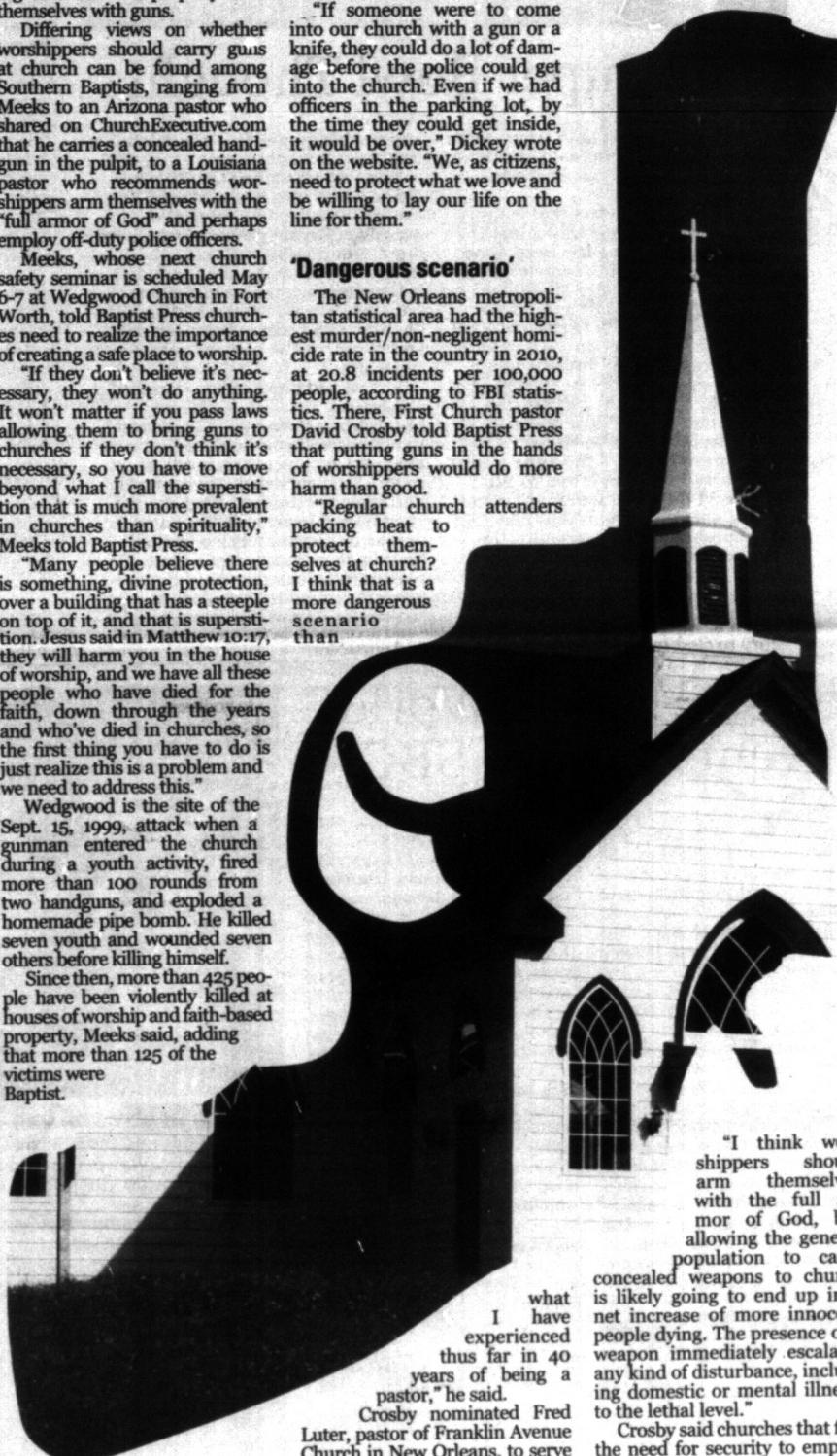
Worshippers not willing to secure training and keep their skills up to date should not own guns, said Meeks, who lawfully carries a concealed gun to church as a police officer.

"If they're not willing to get training, you'd better leave that gun at home or, better yet, don't buy one to begin with," Meeks said, "and know the rules of a gun." The four rules Meeks described:

- All guns are loaded.
- Never point a gun at anything you're not willing to destroy.
- Never put your finger on the trigger until you're ready to pull the trigger.
- Know what's beyond your target.

"If you miss the guy that came into the church with the gun, there's a good chance you'll hit the man behind him or the woman behind him, and what if that is your wife?" Meeks asked, "and stuff like that has happened."

To read a seven-part series on church security by Chester L. Quarles, professor emeritus of criminal justice and homeland security at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, and co-author of the book, *Crime Prevention for Houses of Worship*, visit mbcb.org and click on the "Church Security" icon.



I have experienced thus far in 40 years of being a pastor," he said.

Crosby nominated Fred Luter, pastor of Franklin Avenue Church in New Orleans, to serve

concealed weapons to church is likely going to end up in a net increase of more innocent people dying. The presence of a weapon immediately escalates any kind of disturbance, including domestic or mental illness, to the lethal level."

Crosby said churches that feel the need for security to employ

I am fairly confident that everyone, even hardened football fans, has heard enough about the Super Bowl. In fact, before the game is ever played and before the kickoff takes place most people have had just about enough of all of the hype and the media blitz that they can stand. Days and, in fact, weeks before the Super Bowl everything including the players, the former players, the plays, the teams, their history, their future, and their coaches has been talked about, bisected, and dissected until the majority of us want to scream. It is the pinnacle game and when it is over it is symbolically the end of football season. Men move into depression and many of the ladies say a resounding Amen!

The Super Bowl is a strange American phenomenon. Everybody, including people who do not know one thing about football, seems to get in on the conversation. While a big night of football on TV like Monday night football may have 20 million people watching, the Super Bowl attracts over a hundred million. But love it or hate it, the game seems to be here to stay. Since I have been around for all of the Super Bowls that have taken place, although I haven't watched all of them, I thought I would point out a few thoughts for your consideration.

For one thing I would point out that there is only one winner. At the end of the season, two teams play and one team wins everything. Now the teams that I particularly like did not even make it to the top two. Actually, they didn't get in the four or more category in the march to be the super winner. So I was simply relegated to a sideline observer who was pulling for the Mississippi guys



Post Super Bowl Thoughts

who were playing on both teams to do well. But when all was said and done and the dust settled one champion reigned.

I reflected on the fact that is the way it is going to be in all realms of life. After everything has been done and said, after all of the conversations and the criticisms, after all of the hope and change, one stands and will be announced as Lord of Lords and King of Kings for everyone to see and know that without mistake Jesus is Lord. Regardless of whether you are Baptist or Buddhist, Methodist or Muslim, Jesus Christ will be Lord eternally.

But in addition to there being only one winner, I thought about the many losers related to Super Bowl day and week. I am not talking about the teams that play, but the atmosphere that surrounds the event and all of the things that are a part of the game. It is a day of parties, eating, drinking, and watching. In addition to a football game, it is a food carnival leading up to the big day

and the big game. One commentator had pulled together stats on all of the eating that was going to take place. He declared it to be the second largest caloric intake day of the year in America (Thanksgiving being number one). But the focus of this calorie celebration is on chips, dips, soft drinks, and especially on beer and other alcoholic beverages. Millions of pounds of chips and cases of beer were sold and consumed as part of Super Bowl Weekend.

It is neither healthy nor helpful to anyone involved. Since Mississippi is the state with the most obese population, I can tell you for sure that we do not need any encouragement to eat more. I am sure that someone will pull together the stats showing the elevation of heart attacks and even deaths by gorging. The elevation may come as people leave Super Bowl parties intoxicated and are involved in accidents that take someone's life. More than likely those stats will not be highlighted in order to prick or

even shock our national psyche simply because there is a lot of prestige at stake and a lot of money to be made.

My final thought that I would throw out is to remember that when it's over, it is over. Millions of people who watched the game enjoyed a time of getting together and got up on Monday and went to work with little effect on their life. For some, it is a sad day but they will move on counting down the days for about six more months until the new season starts and the cycle through the process begins again to see who the next Super Bowl winner will be. A small percentage know who last year's Super Bowl winner was and even fewer know the winner from the year before. Only the sharpest of Super Bowl historians can tell you each of the winners through all of the years. And in a sense we need to ask, "What does it matter?" While it is a business, an industry, and a sporting activity with huge dollars attached, with or without it little if anything is affected eternally.

That is not so with kingdom business to which we have been called. Following all of the coming and going, throwing and catching, running and tackling not much is different. But what you and I do in being involved in sharing the Good News that Jesus Christ comes to give life now and life more abundantly and forever makes all of the difference in people's lives. In Christ Jesus, we can come to the end of this journey and the beginning of eternity and say, "Thanks be to God that giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The author can be contacted at jfutral@mccb.org.

VBS 2013, 'Colossal Costal World,' previewed at events around SBC

NASHVILLE (BP) — When Shane Garrison was a little boy, the chasm between his non-Christian home and the local Baptist church was just too wide to cross — but one summer, Vacation Bible School (VBS) became his way to cross that gap.

"I grew up in a home where no one had any association with God or Jesus or a church," Garrison said. "It was just never talked about at all. I knew there was a church in town, but I didn't think it was somewhere I could go. It was for other people but one summer, VBS became a bridge... a way for me to get from my house to the church."

Garrison, assistant professor of educational ministries at Campbellsville University in Campbellsville, Ky., was the keynote speaker at LifeWay's 2013 VBS Preview events this winter. LifeWay hosted more than 3,500 VBS leaders at events in Fort Worth; Nashville; Kissimmee, Fla.; and at LifeWay's Ridgecrest (N.C.) Conference Center.

VBS leaders attending the preview events will return to their states and associations to train thousands of local church leaders.

Every year more than 25,000 churches host VBS, enrolling nearly three million children and adults, resulting in an average of more than 80,000 professions of faith in Christ.

Leaders learned about the Colossal Coaster World-themed VBS taken from 2 Timothy 1:7: "For God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment." The curriculum will challenge kids to face their fears and trust God on the roller coaster of life.

Breakout sessions at the preview events emphasized decorations, music, crafts, age-group teaching, outreach and follow-up. Participants were encouraged to make VBS an evangelistic event to reach unchurched children in their communities.

Garrison said his grandmother decided he needed to go to VBS one summer, so she made sure he was up and ready each day. "I don't know that she was so intent on me learning what VBS offered as much as she was just determined that I wasn't going to stay in bed all morning every day that summer, so I went."

He reminded VBS leaders

these spiritual orphans don't know "the church rules."

"To me, VBS looked a lot like school," Garrison said. The morning celebration, he said, was like a school assembly; snacks were like lunch; the preacher was like the principal; recreation was like recess and craft time was like art, he explained.

The similarities ended on Wednesday of that week, though, when he heard the preacher explain the Gospel.

"I'd never heard that Jesus loved me. I didn't know my life could be any different. I didn't know I was supposed to close my eyes and bow my head when we prayed, so I was watching him pray and listening to every word. As I thought about what he was saying, God reached down and spoke to me — directly to me — and I couldn't believe it."

When the pastor asked if anyone had prayed that prayer with him and wanted to talk, Garrison said he didn't know any better than to yell out, "Me, me!"

"You may be unwittingly erecting a barrier to the spiritual orphans if you are plan-



GETTING READY FOR VBS — Colossal Coaster World Musical, featuring the Hilldale Church children's choir from Clarksville, Tenn., was performed at LifeWay's 2013 VBS Preview event in Nashville. (BP photo)

ning your VBS around your own church kids," he said.

Garrison, who serves as transitional pastor of Living Grace Church in Campbellsville, Ky., said he understood that church parents want their kids to have a great time at VBS, but he implored leaders not to forget about using it as an evangelistic bridge.

"VBS might be the only time during the entire year you have the opportunity to reach these

spiritual orphans," Garrison said. "It may be the only time they get to come to your church."

He urged leaders to turn their hearts away from the priority of decorations, the music, the crafts and snacks. "This year, make the spiritual orphans your priority," he said.

VBS leaders can find more planning tips and tools on LifeWay's VBS blog at www.lifeway.com/vbs.

Boy Scouts delay decision; traditionalists encouraged

IRVING, Texas (BP) — Facing pressure from its supporters and members, the Boy Scouts of America, Inc., executive board announced Wednesday it is delaying a decision on lifting its prohibition of gay Scout leaders and members until May, when it will put the matter before its 1,400 voting members.

Meeting in Irving, Texas, the board was considering a proposal that would have replaced the national ban with a local option for individual councils to determine the policy, potentially leaving a patchwork of different policies within the same city. Outside groups on both sides had criticized the proposal.

In a statement, the Scouts announced that "after careful consideration and extensive dialogue within the Scouting family, along with comments from those outside the organization," the board concluded that "due to the complexity of this issue, the organization needs time for a more deliberate review of its membership policy."

The statement further said that the board directed its committees to engage Scout members and "listen to their perspectives and concerns." The board will "work on a resolution on membership standards" and present it to the 1,400 voting members at the national annual meeting in May.

Fred Luter, president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and pastor of Franklin Avenue Church in New Orleans, called it "encouraging news."

"I'm very excited to hear that the Boy Scouts have delayed their decision and that they're going to put it before the annual meeting," Luter told Baptist Press. "I also want to thank all the believers across the country who have been praying about this situation. I just can't help but think that the 'prayers of the righteous availeth much' in this situation. I don't think it's a coincidence that the decision was delayed."

Frank Page, president of the SBC Executive Committee in Nashville, also applauded the move. He had appeared on CNN Wednesday morning prior to the Scouts' announcement to defend the current Boy Scouts' policy.

"I am delighted the Scouts have delayed their decision," Page told Baptist Press. "While I wish they had put this to rest by voting to maintain their current policy, at least this gives all segments of the Scouting family an opportunity to express their views to the Scouting leadership."

"I urge all Bible-believing Christians to continue to pray that the Boy Scouts will hold



NO CHANGE NEEDED — Boy Scouts from the Dallas area gathered near the podium at a rally on Wednesday to show their support for the traditional policy of the Scouts, which encourages them to be morally straight. The Scouts do not allow homosexuals to serve as members or leaders. (BP photo)

"I am delighted the Scouts have delayed their decision. While I wish they had put this to rest by voting to maintain their current policy, at least this gives all segments of the Scouting family an opportunity to express their views to the Scouting leadership. I urge all Bible-believing Christians to continue to pray that the Boy Scouts will hold fast to the biblical principles of morality and righteousness when they revisit this issue in May."

Frank Page

president of the SBC Executive Committee

fast to the biblical principles of morality and righteousness when they revisit this issue in May.

Simultaneous to the vote at an Irving, Texas, hotel, a prayer vigil and rally sponsored by Texas Values, an Austin-based conservative group, was being held outside the Scouts' national headquarters in Irving, drawing several hundred people, including Boy Scouts, who were protesting the proposed change.

Chip Turner, chairman of the Boy Scouts' Religious Relations Committee, said Wednesday he was pleased with the decision as it reflects a resolution passed by committees representing all 190,000 Boy Scout troops in America. Turner said there was only one dissenting vote as the resolution passed through three committees Monday on its way to the executive board prior to Wednesday's meeting. The resolution asked the executive

board to table a vote on the matter pending further discussion.

WORLD Magazine reported that after the Boy Scouts of Canada lifted its ban on homosexual leaders in 1999, membership dropped by half over the next five years, from about 300,000 to about 150,000.

The Boy Scouts have lost at least three corporate sponsors in recent months because of their current policy: UPS, Intel, and the Merck Foundation. All cited the Scouts' policy on homosexual leaders in their decisions.

Also, two prominent Boy Scouts board members — AT&T CEO Randall Stevenson and Ernst & Young CEO James Turley — also had said the Scouts should change their policy.

However, the Boy Scouts' base remains traditional with around 70% of all Scouting units owned and operated by faith-based organizations.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) leads all religious organizations with 38,000 units and 420,000 participating youth, followed by the United Methodists (11,000 units; 371,000 youth) and the Roman Catholic Church (8,570; 283,000). Baptists are sixth (4,100; 109,000).

When the Boy Scouts board members arrived for their meeting on Feb. 4, they were greeted with a half-page USA Today ad which was signed by some of the nation's leading pro-family groups and urged the Scouts to "Show courage" and "Stand firm for timeless values" by upholding the current policy.

Organizations signing the ad were the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, Family Research Council, Liberty Counsel, Bott Radio Network, American Family Association, and Concerned Women for America. More than 40 national and state pro-family organizations signed it.

The board was considering the proposal a mere six months after it concluded a two-year review by upholding the current policy. The Scouts released a statement then that said, "The vast majority of the parents of youth we serve value their rights to address issues of same-sex orientation within their family, with spiritual advisers, and at the appropriate time and in the right setting."

In his appearance on CNN, Page said churches "would

and could" fill the gap in lost corporate financial support if the Scouts upheld the policy. "[The Scouts] have not given the churches an opportunity to step up to the plate and support more. This was all a surprise to us."

Page spoke in an interview opposite Matthew Breen, editor-in-chief of the gay publication The Advocate, in a five-minute interview moderated by CNN's Carol Costello.

Breen accused religious groups of discrimination, saying that "nothing is less American." However, Page said the issue is discrimination against biblical morality. "This is about discrimination," Page said. "It is about intolerance toward a private group who holds to biblical morality, which does reveal righteousness and unrighteousness."

"It's about a systemic attempt to hurt, to change a private organization that holds to certain beliefs. That's what this is about. It is about discrimination and intolerance toward those who hold a biblical morality, and it's a sad day when we, they cannot express their beliefs and hold to them."

Page said the church community was given one or two weeks notice that the Boy Scouts were considering a vote to reverse their policy that limits participation to those who meet certain moral standards, while the corporate community was notified far in advance.

At one point, CNN's Costello asked Page, "What about love thy neighbor? ... Do you love your gay neighbor?" Page replied, "Absolutely. I have gay family members, Carol, and I believe in loving them but part of love is to tell people the truth. If you don't tell the people the truth, it is the worst form of love."

Richard Land, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, penned a letter to the Boy Scouts Jan. 31, asserting that changing the current policy defies common sense.

"[W]ith the admission of homosexual Scout leaders, the BSA would place men, who by their own definition are sexually attracted to men, in close, supervisory proximity to teenage boys, which invites real human tragedies. We are not saying homosexuals are pedophiles," Land wrote.

"However, how many parents would send their teenage daughters on camping trips with heterosexual male troop leaders? They would not — not because they believe that such heterosexual men are pedophiles, but because they realize that under such close, supervisory care of men who by definition are attracted to women, human tragedies could, and inevitably would, occur."

Just for the Record



John Russell, Associate Director of Development of the International Mission Board (SBC) presents a plaque to Stan May, pastor of **IMMANUEL CHURCH, OLIVE BRANCH**, for being in the top 200 churches of the SBC in 2011 giving to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. Immanuel gave \$95,097.56 to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering in 2011, the 135th highest offering in the Convention.



BUNKER HILL CHURCH, COLUMBIA, recognized Randy Gardner for 10 years of service as pastor on Jan. 21. The church celebrated with a pot luck lunch and love offering. Shown are Gardner and deacon chairman Melvin Grant.



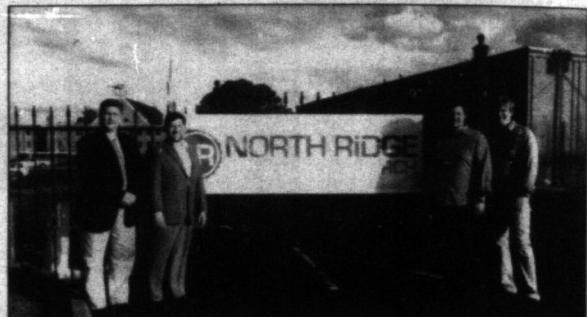
The Mission Friends/Children in Action of **NEW SIGHT CHURCH, BROOKHAVEN**, recently prepared and delivered snack boxes to nursing home residents. Shown are Jessica & Logan Chalk, Madison Foster, and Emily Douglas. Tasha Douglas, CIA/Mission Friends leader.



CHESTER CHURCH, CHOCTAW COUNTY, honored Pearlene Baxter Dec. 23, 2012, by her family and the church membership. A cross was hung in the Family Life Center in honor of her life and to remember the tornado of Apr. 24, 2010 that destroyed the church. A brick sign reading Chester Baptist Church was dedicated in her honor also. She is seen with four generations of her family. Rob Faulk, pastor.



Members of **WALTHALL CHURCH, WALTHALL**, were challenged by pastor Mike Ramage to read through the Bible in 2012. Shown are, front row: Linda Mann, Karen Tabb, Glenda Clanton, Tish Beni, and Jettye Sappington; back row: Carol Hillhouse, Sachiko Donohoo, Patti Ramage, Melissa Wicha, and Gail Dorroh.



WOODLAND HILLS CHURCH and NORTH RIDGE FONDREN CHURCH, Jackson, have partnered together to spread the gospel and disciple believers in the historic Fondren district of Jackson. Shown are Woodland Hills pastor W. Tyler Pigott, deacon chairman Sam Hathorn; on right, North Ridge pastors Scott Wilson and Eric Smith.



The Royal Ambassadors of **CALVARY CHURCH, HATTIESBURG**, were recognized for the Royal Ambassador achievements they completed in 2012.

In other Church News:

► **Gumpond Church, Lumberton**, is hosting The Riders and Chronicle in concert Feb. 23, 6 p.m. Love offering.

► **First Church, Lumberton**, is hosting the Florida Boys in concert Feb. 22, 7 p.m. Love offering.

► **Antioch Church, House Community, Union**, will host a 3D bow shoot and wild game super Feb. 16. Bow shoot, 11 a.m.; supper, 6 p.m.; coyote

calling seminar, 7 p.m.; Jon Paul Moody, speaker. Trophies awarded for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd places in child, youth, women, and men's divisions. Door prizes. Free.

► **First Church, Batesville**, will host Stacey Smith, Arkansas Department of Corrections Denominational Chaplain to the prison she was incarcerated in for 12 years, on March 4, 7 p.m.

► **Puckett Church, Puckett**, is hosting a dyslexia awareness seminar Mar. 2, 1 – 4 p.m. Susan Barton, speaker.

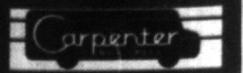
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Bivocational/ Small Church News



THE FAMILY OF GOD CHURCH, sponsored by the **HICKORY RIDGE CHURCH, FLORENCE**, has been established. Scotty Smith is the newly ordained pastor. The new church is located between Florence and Byram in the Friendship community. The congregation now numbers over 40. Nine people have been led to Christ in the last 9 months. On December 2, two deacons were ordained, Danny Boatner and Bobby Pugh. Shown are Scotty Smith, pastor; wife, Rachel; Boatner; and Bobby and Cassie Pugh.

2013 JOHN 3:16 Conference

Current Questions in the Doctrine of Salvation Discussion

Presented by Jerry Vines Ministries, Inc.

North Metro Baptist Church
Lawrenceville, GA

March 21-22, 2013

WITH FEATURED GUESTS:



**DAVID. L. ALLEN • EMIR CANER
STEVE GAINES • ERIC HANKINS
ADAM HARWOOD • JERRY VINES**

Conference Location:

North Metro Baptist Church
1026 Old Peachtree Road NE
Lawrenceville, GA 30043
770-995-9055 • www.northmetro.net



DR. FRANK COX, HOST PASTOR

Pastor of North Metro Baptist Church

For more information, visit www.jerryvines.com

College News

In other College News:

► **Mississippi College** will host its 2013 Career Day Feb. 19. The day is an opportunity for students to network with employers, enhance interview skills, and dress for success. For information, contact Jennifer McGill at (601) 925-7780 or McGill@mc.edu. Details are also available at www.mc.edu/career.



Eighteen **WILLIAM CAREY UNIVERSITY** students from the Tradition campus were named Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges: Pictured are (front row left to right) Shelly Autmon, Ocean Springs; Archie Dickens, Gulfport; Diana Andrews, Ocean Springs; Taffanie Dickey, Biloxi; Brittany Menhel, Ocean Springs; Jennifer Hoffman, Gulfport; Tiffany Taylor, Gulfport; Misti Rote, Stamford, Texas; (back row left to right) Robert Higdon, Gulfport; Reba Carlisle, Wiggins; Emily Roberts, Biloxi; Maggie Ladner, Kiln; Jerry Creel, Biloxi; Heather Pitovich, Biloxi; Felicia Necaise, Perkinston; Michelle Moses, Falmouth, Mass.; Larry Bridges, St. Martin, and Brandy Doucet, Bay St. Louis.

Staff Changes



PINEVIEW CHURCH, LAUREL, welcomes (from left) new interim music minister Joey McGill and his wife, Pam; new interim pastor Bill Riley and his wife, Mary; and new youth ministers Joshua and Haley Eddy.



DESOTO CHURCH, CLARKE COUNTY, has called Charles E. Davis, Sr., as their transitional pastor. He is shown with his wife, Betty.



AIRPORT CHURCH, GRENADA, called John Windell Lancaster as pastor Jan. 20. He is shown with deacon Leon Kennedy.

Stanford law school opens first religious freedom legal clinic

STANFORD, Calif. (BP) — As religious freedom litigation has ballooned in the United States, especially over the last year, Stanford Law School has opened the nation's first legal clinic devoted exclusively to religious freedom cases.

"It's not needed because the United States is uniquely persecuting — it's not," said former U.S. Circuit Judge Michael McConnell, a professor at Stanford Law who argues many religious liberty cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. "I believe we are the freest and most welcoming country in the world ... but we still need to fight and to think and to litigate and protect."

The legal clinic opens at one of the most prestigious law schools in the United States. Ranked the second-best law school in the country by U.S. News & World Report, Stanford Law currently has 11 legal clinics where students enroll full-time for 12 weeks.

The students in each clinic handle actual cases, but do so under the supervision of a professor. The religious freedom clinic has four students working this quarter under the clinic's director, James Sonne, and six signed up for the next quarter. "It's like a small law firm," Sonne said.

The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty donated \$1.6 million to get the religious freedom clinic off the ground but Sonne said McConnell, who was on President George W. Bush's short list of possible Supreme Court nominees, was the driving force behind opening the clinic.

McConnell explained why fighting real religious freedom cases would help students, and the public, understand the underlying right.

"The stories of real human beings matter more than theory," he said. "When you learn about real people and what they value and what they undergo, that is the sort of thing that changes hearts much more than abstraction."

The students will start by handling two religious land use cases, one for a mosque and one for a church. They'll also handle a case of a Jewish convert seeking a circumcision in prison, and a case of employment discrimination over Sabbath observance.

Sonne hopes the clinic will lower the temperature on religious freedom disputes. "We're not going to avoid controversy but we need to

"As our culture diversifies, people might look at religious liberty as a historical accident, and we're trying to show that's not the case. It's a natural human right that affects all of us."

James Sonne
Stanford Law School
religious freedom
clinic director

be prudent in our case selection. We are not a litigation group that has a particular goal in mind other than to train students."

McConnell concurred: "Religious liberty needs to be articulated by people whose agenda is neither the left nor the right."

The Becket Fund, which helped fund the clinic, is currently handling seven lawsuits just on religious liberty violations under the federal abortion/contraceptive mandate. The organization also handles a wide variety of other religious liberty cases in the United States and abroad.

McConnell, in the unveiling of the clinic in mid-January at Stanford Law, said that he thinks there will be more and more litigation based off what he called "bureaucratic indifference," which he characterized as, "We can't take the trouble to deal with these pesky people who want to do odd things. ... It's easier to say 'one size fits all,' the same rules for everyone."

In the past, McConnell noted, many of the religious conflicts in the United States were between Catholics and Protestants. Now, he believes, the conflicts will arise mainly between those who are religiously committed and those who are not.

"We are going to see clashes between those people who have deep commitments to a variety of religious traditions ... versus those who think it's premodern, it's superstitious, it's reactionary," he said.

Sonne put it another way. "As our culture diversifies, people might look at religious liberty as a historical accident, and we're trying to show that's not the case. It's a natural human right that affects all of us."

First Person: Eating healthy is part of God's plan for our lives

with David Roach

It's that brief season of the year when most people are still on track with their resolutions to eat more healthfully and lose weight.

In pursuit of that goal, millions have consulted Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, online diet plans, calorie-counting apps, and a host of other nutritional guides, most of which have great value — but what about the Bible? Does it have anything to say about our eating habits?

Certainly it does. Incorporating Scripture's wisdom into our New Year's resolutions could mean the difference between success and failure.

First of all, we should make a distinction between healthy eating and fasting. The Bible says a great deal about fasting, but that's abstaining from food for a purely spiritual purpose. Healthy eating habits are a different matter, which the Bible also addresses.

For one, the apostle Paul calls the body "a temple of the Holy Spirit" and urges, "You are not your own ... glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). The context is an exhortation to flee sexual immorality and not profane the body that was created to honor God, but there's an application to diet as well. Honoring our bodies as sacred temples certainly includes eating healthy foods that keep them functioning well.

The Old Testament, in fact, includes an example of God's blessing people who eat healthy food. When Daniel and his three friends resolved not to eat the rich food of Babylon but instead make their diet vegetables and water, "they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food" (Daniel 1:15 NIV).

Of course, health was not the reason for Daniel's food choice. It had to do with ritual purity and being set apart from the pagan culture of Babylon, and God honored his obedience. Nevertheless, it was also an occasion when God brought positive consequences from healthy eating. (It's worth noting that the Old Testament ceremonial laws on diet are no longer in

force under the New Covenant, though moral principles related to food still hold. See Acts 10:9-16.)

Add Proverbs' warning about the ruinous effects of gluttony (Proverbs 23:20-21), and this is enough to assure us that God cares about our caloric intake.

Thankfully, though, that's not all the Bible has to say about eating. Paul says that God "richly provides us with everything to enjoy" (1 Timothy 6:17). The writer of Ecclesiastes makes the connection to eating explicit, telling us that we should enjoy food as a gift from God (Ecclesiastes 3:13).

Perhaps that is part of the reason why the Old Testament law required Jews to participate in a series of feasts every year and why scriptural examples of godly hospitality commonly include large quantities of food (see, for example, Genesis 18:6-8; Judges 6:19; 2 Samuel 9:10-13; Luke 15:23).

Jesus Himself instituted the New Covenant at a feast, the Passover meal. When God wanted to picture for the apostle John the joy that will occur in heaven at Christ's second coming, He showed him a vision of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-10) — another meal. God not only cares about healthy eating, there's also a place for feasting in His economy.

So what does all this mean for dieters? While the Bible doesn't prescribe any specific diet plan, it does highlight the principle of balance between healthy restraint and enjoyment of rich foods. In other words, make a habit of disciplined, healthy eating, but on occasion let yourself enjoy a feast of God's good gifts.

Looking forward to the feasts will help keep you going during the seasons of restraint. Interestingly, that distillation of the Bible's wisdom on eating is the same conclusion that dieticians have reached after thousands of years of scientific research.

In Scripture God truly does provide "all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3).

Roach is a writer in Shelbyville, Ky. This article first appeared at BibleMesh.com, and appears here courtesy of Baptist Press.



ROACH

South sweeps list of cities whose residents regularly read the Bible

NASHVILLE (BP) — The South is home to the top 10 most "Bible-minded" cities in the United States, according to new Barna Group research.

Defining Bible-minded as a person who reads the Bible in a typical week and strongly asserts the accuracy of its teaching, researchers determined that Knoxville, Tenn., is the most Bible-minded city in the United States, with 52% of the city's population fitting that category.

Other cities in the top five are Shreveport, La., with 52% of its population deemed Bible-minded; Chattanooga, Tenn., 52%; Birmingham, Ala., 50%; and Jackson, Miss., 50%.

At the bottom of the scale are Providence, R.I./Bedford, Mass., nine percent; Albany/Schenectady/Troy, N.Y., 10%; Burlington, Vt./Plattsburgh, N.Y., 16%; Portland/Auburn, Maine, 16%; Hartford/New Haven, Conn., 16%;

and Boston, Mass./Manchester, N.H., 16%.

Researchers advised Christian leaders to view the news optimistically. "In this analysis, 83 out of 96 cities in the U.S. have at least 20% of their residents qualifying as Bible-minded," Barna Group President David Kinnaman said. "Christian leaders should recognize that most of the major cities in the nation continue to have basis for biblical engagement among a significant share of the population."

Study results indicate a diversity of Bible-minded scores among population markets across the United States, ranging from the high of 52% and the low of nine percent, Barna reported.

"As ministry leaders in particular, it's important to keep both vantage points in tension," Kinnaman said. "Whether you live in a city ranked in the top half of Bible-minded cities or in the bot-

tom half of Bible-minded cities, there are still tens of thousands of people to reach regarding both the message of the Scriptures and their importance.

The key is to not merely preach to those insiders, but instead to equip and empower those who do believe with a strong and relevant message to take out into their communities, vocations and spheres of influence."

Researchers drew results from telephone and online interviews with random samples of 42,855 adults nationwide. Interviews were conducted over seven years, ending last May, according to Barna. Full results are available at barna.org.

Barna markets itself as a private, nonpartisan organization that has been conducting and analyzing primary research since 1984 to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors.

Oregon sets records for physician-assisted suicide

WASHINGTON (BP) — The state of Oregon again has broken its record for physician-assisted suicides, recording 77 such deaths in 2012.

Last year's total — which eclipsed the previous record of 71 established in 2011 — means the state now has recorded 673 assisted suicide deaths since its Death With Dignity Act took effect in 1997, the Oregon Public Health Division reported Jan. 16. That law permits terminally ill citizens of Oregon to take their own lives by using lethal drug doses prescribed by doctors.

Pro-life bioethics experts again criticized the practice, which also is legal in the state of Washington.

"No medicine is either developed or approved to kill people. Yet, this is precisely what is being done under the banner of a perverse law. We

should care for the dying, not kill them," said C. Ben Mitchell, professor of moral philosophy at Union University in Jackson, Tenn., and a biomedical and life issues consultant for the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission in Nashville.

"How can Americans sleep soundly every night knowing that frightened patients are being abandoned by their doctors, who offer them a chemical means to kill themselves?" Mitchell added.

Alex Schadenberg, executive director of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, said the latest annual report demonstrates several flaws in Oregon's assisted suicide law, including:

- It does not prevent abuse of the elderly.
- It does not restrict assisted suicide to the terminally ill.

"No medicine is either developed or approved to kill people. Yet, this is precisely what is being done under the banner of a perverse law. We should care for the dying, not kill them."

C. Ben Mitchell

professor of moral philosophy at Union University

■ It does not protect the depressed from being influenced to take their lives.

■ It enables a "few insiders" to operate the assisted suicide program.

The latest report and recent news articles show there are "significant problems" with the law "that no amount of control will keep hidden, forever, from its citizens," Schadenberg wrote on his blog.

The latest report again re-

flected concerns voiced in the past by critics about inadequate care of those who are considering assisted suicide. For instance, only two of the 77 who died by means of assisted suicide last year were referred to a psychiatrist or psychologist for formal evaluation. In another example, prescribing doctors were present for the deaths of only seven — or nine percent — of those who took their own lives.

Oregon also set a record last

year in the number of people, 115, who received prescriptions for lethal drug doses, surpassing by one the previous high set in 2011. Twenty-three of the 115 people who obtained prescriptions in 2012 died without taking the drugs. The state did not have information on whether 25 others who received prescriptions had ingested the drugs. Eleven patients who obtained prescriptions in 2011 died from taking lethal doses last year.

The Oregon report again showed people who took advantage of assisted suicide had three concerns far more than others — 94% were concerned about "losing autonomy," 92% about being unable "to engage in activities making life enjoyable," and 78% about a "loss of dignity."

ABEDINI

cont. from p. 1

and relies on us to be his voice. It is so easy to feel forgotten in the walls of the prison. Please help me make sure he is never forgotten."

Previous reports indicated prison officials have refused to deliver medicine and other basic provisions to Abedini because they consider him "unclean" due to his Christianity.

As of Feb. 8, more than 155,000 people had signed a petition at SaveSaeed.org, asking the United Nations, European Union, and Council of Europe to mobilize their resources to require Iran to honor its treaties and its constitution and release the pastor.

ACLJ also has enlisted the help of U.S. Sens. Marco Rubio, R.-Fla., and Lindsey Graham, R.-S.C., toward freeing Abedini. Rubio was instrumental in obtaining a statement from U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry during his confirmation process supporting the pastor.

"I, along with the U.S. government, condemn Iran's continued violation of the universal right of freedom of religion and call on the Iranian authorities to respect Mr. Abedini's human rights and release him," Kerry said. "The Department of State is in close contact with the Abedini family and is actively engaged on this case."

Graham wrote a letter to President Obama asking him to intervene in the American citizen's case and stating that the situation "is symbolic of the gross injustice against all Christians in Iran today."

"It is imperative that you personally add your voice to

those calling for Pastor Abedini's immediate and unconditional release," Graham told Obama. "There is no better symbol of American values, specifically freedom of religion, or demonstration of loyalty to the welfare of our citizens abroad than vocal and sustained support directly from the president of the United States."

Sekulow, in a blog post Feb. 5, said Abedini's attorney filed an appeal in Tehran but it could take considerable time for the Iranian court to act.

"It's important to note, though, as we saw in the case of Pastor Youcef, appeals in these cases often lack any semblance of due process and justice, and are frequently no more than a rubber stamp of the initial unjust trial," Sekulow said, referring to Youcef Nadarkhani, who was imprisoned in Iran on apostasy charges last year.

In addition to ACLJ's legal and diplomatic efforts to free Abedini, the advocacy organization has launched an international social media effort to raise awareness of his plight. Steven Curtis Chapman, To-By-Mac, Bart Millard of MercyMe and other musicians and concerned citizens have joined the effort. Videos of the musicians speaking on behalf of Abedini are posted at SaveSaeed.org.

ACLJ believes that the more people are calling for Abedini's release, the more international media, governments and world leaders are willing to put pressure on Iran to grant his freedom.

Sekulow urged people to sign the petition, share Abedini's story, and pray for the pastor and his family.

GUIDESTONE

cont. from p. 1

health plans to make known to Congress and regulators the unique needs of church health plans and those ministers and other church employees who rely on them, the GuideStone release said.

"We count it our special privilege and our sacred responsibility to protect and preserve church plans that are uniquely designed for pastors and others so faithfully serving churches and ministry organizations," Hawkins said. "That commitment continues during this time of uncertainty and change within the entire health care sector, and it is our deepest desire to undergird and serve churches and ministry organizations every step of the way."

JONES

cont. from p. 2

would become the standards from which students make life decisions such as whom to date, whom to marry, what occupation they will enter, what friendships they will value. The college years in our culture are when most adults make major decisions that shape the rest of their lives. Pray that they will follow Jesus in these choices.

College students are not the future of our church; they are the church. Take some time today to love, invest in, and pray for the college students in your life.

Jones is the Baptist Collegiate Ministry campus minister at the University of Memphis.

Submission Guidelines

The Baptist Record is pleased to publish news and photographs of special events that take place in cooperating churches of the Mississippi Baptist Convention.

News submitted for publication in The Baptist Record must be either (a) typewritten, (b) neatly printed on 8 1/2 by 11-inch paper, or (c) neatly printed on standardized forms provided by the newspaper. All articles must be received in writing; no articles will be accepted over the telephone.

News may be submitted electronically to the address below, and must be contained in the message segment of an e-mail form. Due to increasing virus threats, no text attachments will be accepted. Photograph attachments are permissible.

Please make articles concise. Include the who, what, when, where details of the story, along with a contact person's address and telephone number.

Photographs may be color or black and white. Instant photos and digital printouts are not reproducible. Digital photos may be used if submitted as a JPEG file via either e-mail, CD or DVD. Photos must be clear, sharp, and well-lit. Cell phone photographs and other low resolution items are generally not publishable. Photographs can not be returned. Please do not attach photos with tape or staples.

All news items are subject to editing, and all photographs are subject to cropping. Photographs must depict people. No landscape-, building- or object-only photographs will be printed. News items and/or photographs can be published one time only. News items and/or photographs depicting benefits and activities for secular or outside organizations will not be published. Deadline for submitting news is one week prior to requested publication date.

Articles that are not date-sensitive will be published on a space-available basis.

Submit news and photographs to The Baptist Record, P.O. Box 530, Jackson, MS 39205-0530. FAX: (601) 292-3330. E-mail: baptistrecord@mbcb.org.

Pursuing Those Called to Tell • Jonah 1: 1-4, 7-12, 17; 2: 1-4

As we continue our study theme, "Revealing the Heart of God," unit three focuses on God as a relentless pursuer of people. God wants everyone to know the truth about His judgment and salvation. We as God's people have been made a part of His divine plan to reach those who do not have a personal relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. While all believers have been chosen by God as His messengers, it has been my experience that many believers are very reluctant to share God's message to others. Some people think that only 'professionals' such as missionaries and church staff are responsible for taking the message to the lost, while others have not seriously considered how they can carry the good news of Christ to others. Our study in the book of Jonah reveals to us how serious God is about us sharing His message of hope.

Which Way are You Going? (Jonah 1: 1-3)

We have all found ourselves for one reason or another going in the wrong direction. Any way you look at it, our direction is totally determined by our own choices. There may be many external circumstances at work

around us, but it comes down to our choice. In our passage today we find Jonah hearing a word from God to go to Nineveh and preach to the people there. One would think that in the next part of the story we would find Jonah preaching in Nineveh, but we do not. We find him boarding a ship to the city of Tarshish, a city that is in the opposite direction from Nineveh. Jonah did not want to preach to the people of Nineveh. All the other prophets often spoke words of judgment to gentile nations, but Jonah is the only one God called to go to a gentile city and



Explore the Bible with Huey Dedmon

preach to them directly. The only reason given to us for his refusal to go to Nineveh is found in Jonah 4: 1-2. Apparently Jonah knew that if he went to Nineveh and spoke God's judgment on them that they would repent. And when they repented he knew God would be merciful to them. Nineveh was a city in the Assyrian Empire and the Assyrians were long time enemies of the Israelites. Maybe this is why

Jonah desired their destruction so much that he would run from God's call. Whatever the reason, we find Jonah going the wrong direction. The question for us is, "What direction are we going?" Is there some reason that we do not share the message of God with those around us?

What Will it Take (Jonah 1: 4, 7-12)

Once we determine the direction of our life we must ask ourselves another question: 'What will it take for us to

move in God's direction?' In Jonah 1: 5-6 we find Jonah on a ship heading the opposite direction from where God wants him to go. God has caused a violent storm to engulf the ship. The ship is in danger of sinking and the captain finds Jonah asleep inside the ship. He asks Jonah to pray to his God to spare their lives. It is at this point that Jonah owns up to his sin and takes responsibility for his refusal to

serve as God's messenger. How often in our own lives does it take a storm of life to cause us to evaluate where we are in our walk with God? What will it take for us to move in the direction God wants us to go? It takes recognizing we have sinned and it takes repentance to get us on the right road.

To Whom will You Turn? (Jonah 1: 17- 2:4)

It must have been a great surprise when Jonah found himself alive in the belly of a great fish. He was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Jesus made reference to "the sign of the prophet Jonah" in Matthew 12: 39-40. He mentioned Jonah's experience as a sign of His being "in the heart of the earth three days and three nights." In times of stress and tribulation, to whom do we turn? Many turn to their finances, social standing, friends, family, etc.... God is the only one who can protect us and restore our relationship with Him. Like Jonah, we must cry out for God's help.

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The Practice of Godliness • 1 Timothy 4:6-16 and Titus 3:1-15

Grandmothers and mothers all those other wise women were right. "Cleanliness IS next to godliness!" So...I cleaned my room. But...I fussed about it. While I fussed and cleaned, I think it was that little song running around in my head that kept me on task and on track.

I've wondered how different the world would have been if Adam and Eve had known this song and obeyed its lyrical encouragement toward godly living. Now that we have traded our childhood giggles for internet googles, I attempted an all-out search for the name of author. "Mister Miss Anonymous" is apparently responsible for these lyrics we should have obeyed. The Bible tells us so...from front to back, from top to bottom...on every page. Follow the bouncing ball and sing along with Bee:

Be careful little eyes what you see.
Be careful little ears what you hear.
Be careful little mouth what you say.
Be careful little mind what you think.
Be careful little heart WHO you love.
Be careful little hands what you do.
Be careful little feet where you go."

Paul was doing his best to nurture Timothy and Titus in the faith. These young pastors of first century churches needed a spiritual mentor to help

them line up the rudder and set the sail of their pastoral leadership boats straight into the breath of Holy Spirit wind. Timothy pastored in Ephesus with the folks who left their First Love. Titus pastored on the island of Crete working daily with the "Cretans" whose picture is in the dictionary beside the definition which reads: "those who just don't seem to get it." Paul's two sons in the faith could have used

the verses of our little tune above as a permanent sermon outline. Who k n o w s , m a y b e Paul wrote the song

AND these two personal letters!!!

Our "five trustworthy sayings" found in the letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus are great reminders for us during this four-Sunday month of February. First Sunday, we learned that the truth of the gospel must be our foundation for...EVERYTHING! Second Sunday, we studied the need for leadership team members who meet biblical qualifications for service. Today, we find our third and fourth trustworthy sayings in BOTH letters under one theme: exhorta-

tions for godly living. Paul made sure he gave this counsel to BOTH young men. Pastors, leaders and members of the Bride of Christ (His Church) must personally practice godliness in their daily lives in order to encourage others to do the same. Spiritually speaking, "Gospel" and "Godliness" rhyme and march to the beat of the heart of God.

What if every morning, every believer would endeavor to be more like Jesus at day's end? A Cajun friend of mine said, "it this way, "Dah clos-sah you git

to God, dah less of you self you can take witt you." With Timothy, Paul used the physical discipline/spiritual discipline analogy. With Titus, Paul used the faith/grace/works analogy. In a nutshell, Paul gave them both the same bone to gnaw on: "Boys, True Faith Works." Good deeds and determined discipline don't save us. Churning in tandem, they are the overflow of surrendered hearts committed to living out the gospel.

The beautiful and costly work of practicing godliness follows our

faith, producing within us the desire to serve God by serving others. In the bird carving shop, I have learned it this way. The dust and shavings on the floor are the parts that didn't look like our hummingbird, the final product. When we allow Him to, God will carve away anything in our lives that does not look like His Son Jesus. Don't look in the mirror now and expect miracles. The chipping-away process of sanctification takes a lifetime. Start today!

In 1 Timothy 4:6, Timothy gets an "Attaboy!" Paul reminds Timothy that he has habitually been being nourished by The Word. Timothy was a faithful follower, pursuing godliness, practicing it in his daily life. Paul tells him to keep on keeping on. Such practices are profitable for the abundant life now and direct routes to the finish line leading into eternity.

In Titus 3, Titus gets a "YaHooooo!" Paul reminds Titus of the gloriously stark contrast of their "before Jesus" life and their "after Jesus" life. God is pleased. Our little song above closes with: "...for the Father up above is looking down with love." Titus 3:4 inspired that lyric.

Brown is the staff evangelist at First Church, Richland.



Bible Studies for Life with Becky Brown



Just for the Record



OLD OAK GROVE CHURCH, MYRTLE, honored its deacons Jan. 27 with a deacon appreciation Sunday. Shown are Danny Robinson and Wayne Hogue, four years; Harmon Jordan, 57 years; and Robert Brownlee, 45 years.



PINE GROVE CHURCH, MAGEE, ordained Steele Cockrell as deacon. Shown is pastor Bill Blair and Cockrell.



BETHEL CHURCH, COPIAH COUNTY, ordained third generation of deacons and ministers Vance Windom, III. His grandfather, Vance Sr., was ordained in the early 70's; Vance Jr. was ordained to the ministry 1977; and Vance III was ordained Jan. 20. His younger brother Tyson is pastor. Shown are Vance Sr., Vance Jr., Vance III, and Tyson Windom.



GRACE UNITED CHURCH, DECATUR, held a baby dedication Jan. 27. Shown are Josh and Kristen McDonald with baby Karmen, and Jessica and Robbie Wyatt with baby Gracie.

(BELOW) CONCORD CHURCH, BENTON-TIPPAH ASSOCIATION, awarded the 2012 Gerald C. Mauney Memorial Scholarship to Kyle Rosas, Millington, Tenn. He graduated Blue Mountain College as president of the Ministerial Association and a member of Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities. Shown are pastor Robert E. Walker and Rosas.



(ABOVE) JOURNEY CHURCH, OLIVE BRANCH, ordained Michael Cooper to the ministry Jan. 27. Pastor Jarrett Jamieson asked Rusty Fair, pastor, Slayden Church, Lamar, to participate in the service. Oscar Geeslin, pastor, Meadowbrook Church, Byhalia, gave the challenge to the candidate, and Cooper's grandmother Diane Cooper gave the benediction prayer. Shown are Cooper, seated, and Jamieson.



UNION HALL CHURCH, BROOKHAVEN, recognizes the children and teenagers who participated in the church's Christmas pageant Dec. 16, 2012.

Truth is not relative.

Find it in the One who is the way, truth, and life.

Simply share the following prayer with God

in your own words:

1. Lord, I admit that I need you. (I have sinned.)
2. I want forgiveness for my sins and freedom from eternal death. (I repent.)
3. I believe Jesus died and rose from the grave to forgive my sins and to restore my relationship with you. (I believe in Jesus.)

4. By faith, I invite Jesus Christ into my life.

From this time on, I want to live in a loving relationship with Him. (I receive Christ as my Savior and Lord.)

But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name." (John 1:12)

If you make a decision for Christ today, contact a local Southern Baptist church for spiritual guidance.